



SPEECH
OF
MR. MORSE OF LOUISIANA,
ON THE
OREGON QUESTION.

DELIVERED
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

JANUARY 15, 1846.

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S P E E C H .

On the resolution giving the twelve months' notice for the termination of the joint occupancy of the Oregon territory.

Mr. MORSE rose and said—

Mr. CHAIRMAN: I had hoped that the committee would have risen, first for the few hours of preparation it would have afforded me; and secondly, not to have been compelled immediately to follow the eloquent gentleman from Virginia; but as the House desire to hear another speech, I will go on.

Mr. Chairman, as I may possibly separate from some of those friends with whom I have been in the habit of acting in this House, and as I shall give a different vote from the one I gave on a similar proposition last year, I desire to state briefly the reasons which have influenced me in the determination to vote for this notice, and I state in all frankness that it is with reluctance that I follow the gentleman from Virginia, for it is not an affectation of modesty, when I assure you that it is not in my power to entertain the House with any of those eloquent and patriotic appeals, those meteoric flashes of wit, or that strong rein of humor, with which this discussion has been from time to time enlivened by so many gentlemen, who have preceded me in the argument on the resolutions upon your table.

Nor is it my intention to make a speech to prepare the minds and hearts of the American people for war; I yield to no man in my admiration of the policy of peace, which has, in the short period of thirty years, advanced our country almost to the front rank in agriculture, commerce, and manufactures, and which, if persevered in for thirty years more, must place her first in all those great elements of national wealth.

And while I believe, in a just quarrel, these United States "are confident against the world in arms," I cannot agree with some of our western friends, that the American eagle will sweep the cross of St. George from this continent, and throw the British lion into the Pacific, without the ruffle of a single feather.

Sir, this notice will never be the cause of war. Oregon will never be the cause of war. It may be the pretence; and if so, it will be a war of principle—monarchy against republicanism, the aristocratic few of God's anointed against the *Oi polloi* of the democracy—and it cannot but be a bloody war; but

with a firm reliance on the continuance of that divine protection, and the trusty blades of millions of freemen, who own no rulers but of their choice, I have no fears for the ultimate result.

It seems, then, to be conceded with perfect unanimity, that we have a clear title to the territory of Oregon up to the 49^o, and by a very large majority of this House, to the whole country up to 54^o 40'. Every member, I believe, who has thus far addressed the committee, has satisfied himself that Oregon is ours. Whether deducing our right from the discovery of Captain Gray in 1790; from the exploration of Lewis and Clark; from the treaty with Spain in 1819; from contiguity of territory; or from manifest necessity, that fact may be assumed in this discussion. I shall, therefore, leave the title out of view, and proceed to offer a few remarks on the course which, in my judgment, it becomes the government to pursue in the maintenance of its just rights, and the steps necessary to be taken to put our citizens in possession of that territory which all admit belongs to us, but which, by some diplomatic legerdemain, seems now more to belong to Great Britain, or rather the Hudson Bay Company.

What is the present condition of this question? After a fruitless negotiation for a number of years, the President informs us that he offered a compromise on the parallel of 49^o, which was instantly refused, and that he has withdrawn the proposition, and negotiation, if it has not come to a close, has at least made a very sudden halt. Shall we reopen this vexed question—reargue the same old propositions—go through the same diplomatic twistings and turnings, without the least hope of ever reaching the end proposed?

If the success of our negotiations on the northern frontier afford us any standard to judge of the advantages of prolonging this—if the right to trade and establish trading positions, without a claim to a single foot of the soil in fee-simple, has grown so strong by the national laws of prescription, that England now indignantly refuses nearly one-half of the whole territory, with the navigation of the Columbia river twice superadded, I concur heartily with the President, that the sooner the notice for the cessation of the joint occupancy is given the better; and

this brings me to the discussion of the measure immediately before the House.

Is it proper to give this notice at this time? The President thinks so, and has so recommended in his message. Has one single argument been adduced to justify the postponement of this notice? Have gentlemen any hope that negotiation will be able to effect anything more than it has done? But, say gentlemen on the other side, This will bring on the war.

I draw no such inference. The only effect will be to get the ultimatum of England. And here I answer the question of the gentleman from Virginia—If England were now to reconsider her refusal, and propose to accept the 49th degree; and it is this: if this joint occupancy still continues, we are bound in *pro conscientia* to accept it. But once give this notice, and this government may take 49°, or refuse it, without the violation of any international good faith express or implied.

The principal—indeed, I may say the only—objection which I have heard urged by any member on this floor, is (assuming this to be a war measure, which I utterly deny) that we are not sufficiently prepared to maintain our rights at this moment. When will we be stronger? Will it be to-day, tomorrow, or in five years? The American people will never, in time of peace, consent to tax themselves to support large standing armies or powerful fleets for an emergency that may never happen—for a war in *future*. It must be a war in *esse*, and then their purses and swords will always be freely placed at the disposal of your President. Sir, we all have read the story of a people—scarcely three millions of souls—who, in resisting a simple parliamentary enactment touching some tea or paper, which they might use or not; when a large minority of that people were, if not opposed, disposed to be neutral, without money or credit, branded with a traitor's name, and threatened with a felon's grave, defied that power, who had studded the earth with fortifications, and whitened the ocean with her sails, and, for a *principle*, engaged in an eight years' war with that "nation, upon whose dominions the sun never set," and "forced the English lion to acknowledge the independence of the American eagle." Sir, it was then proposed to delay this question of principle. What Virginian—nay, sir, what American—has not felt his heart bound in his school-boy days, at the indignant rebuke of the forest-born Demosthenes.

Sir, there is a more recent event, *quorum minima pars fuit*, when it was proposed to admit a revolted province of a sister republic into this Union; and great and wise politicians discoursed most learnedly about the advantages of delay; that it must ultimately certainly be yours; and although the accredited minister of that sister republic demanded his passports, and threatened war, we did what we thought our duty, regardless of all consequences. What constitutes the difference between the cases now and then? Was it because our right to annex Texas was considered a violation of the treaty with Mexico? I will not pursue this inquiry farther. But for my single self, I have a little of that feeling "that would rather rouse a lion than start a hare."

But I will pursue the argument for this notice. I would not vote for the notice last year, because we were hourly expecting an amicable compromise, although I could not well understand what there was to compromise, if, as gentleman say, the title to the whole of Oregon is ours; and because I would

not willingly give either the strongest or the weakest nation any reasonable grounds of offence. Because I would not lightly hazard the hope of a satisfactory settlement of this question; because, not having the same means of ascertaining the situation of the negotiation which belongs to the President, I would not interfere with his policy on that subject. But now, *tempora mutantur, et &c.* When negotiation is virtually at an end; when the English government has for the fourth (and last time I hope) refused the parallel of 49°, and has concluded to wait for a more equitable offer on the part of our government; when the President has signified his wish to give this notice, and has called upon this House to show by their vote that they think with him, shall we grow circumspect at last? Shall we throw distrust upon our title, not only up to 54, but even to 49—or shall we lead the English government and the world at large to believe that we will ever offer a better compromise than we have before offered—49 twice, with the navigation of the Columbia river superadded. "*Perish the thought; never, never, never; lago-like, to the Pontic sea, whose icy current and compulsive course knows no returning ebb,*" we will never recede one inch from our just pretensions to Oregon.

Sir, this notice does not involve a war. Is it not provided for in the convention? Is it not carrying out the treaty? Did the contracting powers so deem it when the treaty was made? On the contrary, would not the arming of your additional regiments, building your stockades, and all and each of the acts for which those gentlemen, who call themselves peculiarly the peace party on this question, be a violation, if not of the letter, at least of the spirit of the treaty? This, I apprehend, was the intention of both the high contracting powers—that whenever each government should have offered its ultimatum, and whenever it was ascertained that this vexed question could not be settled by negotiation, that at least a year's notice should be given, that a sufficient time should be given to both countries to prepare to withdraw their commerce from each others ports as much as possible; in short, to give time for reflection to both countries to determine whether their titles were sufficiently strong to justify the arbitrament of the sword. This, it strikes me, is the common sense view of it, else why was the year's notice inserted? It certainly means something. Do gentlemen suppose that, upon the receipt of this notice, England intends to declare war? I can not bring my mind to any such conclusion. This joint occupancy is a unilateral contract; England, without any title, has all the advantages to be derived from the use of the whole territory, and we, with the clear title to the whole of the territory, divide the occupancy. I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but I venture the assertion, that this question never will be settled, either by negotiation or even by arbitration, if this country were weak enough to submit to it; and the title to Oregon will be in abeyance until the people of that country, finding that the tenure by which they hold their property so unstable, declare themselves independent, which, I presume, England desires, and which time will most assuredly bring about.

You must recollect, sir, that there are other parties more deeply interested in this matter than yourselves; the people of Oregon themselves feel the want of a "local habitation and a name;" their feelings, interests, sympathies, and everything, leads them to attach themselves to you, and unless you

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throw over them theegis of American liberty, you cannot expect that they will wait forever the termination of a negotiation, which England never will put an end to, and which you seem equally disposed to continue, without the least expectation of a satisfactory adjustment.

England don't desire Oregon; she may desire such colonists as she has in the east; the population of Oregon would require too much trouble to keep quiet under her monarchical institutions. They are made of sterner stuff than to be moulded to her iron will. Nor did she want Texas; she would not have taken it for a gracious gift. But she desired to see Texas an independent government, and an adjournment of the last Congress, without the passage of the Texas resolutions, would have lost that beautiful star in our glorious confederacy. I need not recapitulate the arguments. Had I been a Texan, I would never, after being twice rejected, have applied again for admission. The recognition of her independence by Mexico—national pride—everything would have conspired, and the glorious policy of inactivity would have lost us Texas then, and the same policy, if persevered in now, will lose us Oregon. She will never belong to England; but they must have a government firmly established—recognized by all the world. Her language is, Where shall we go? If you do not settle the matter, of necessity we must have a government of our own. England, with a perfect knowledge of the strength of both titles, knows that our government will never recede from 49°; but she further knows that there are men of high standing in both parties, who have expressed themselves favorable to the independence of Oregon, and she is perfectly willing to "bide her time;" and if this is left an open question, some lucky moment may be seized upon to induce us to consent to the independence of Oregon.

As regards the inhabitants of that territory, independence is certainly more desirable than any connexion with England; but in relation to us, for all practical purposes, I had almost as soon see Oregon belonging to England as to see her independent. All the advantages of the China trade would be lost to us forever. For these reasons, I believe that a delay will be fatal to our rights in Oregon, and will give Great Britain all that she desires.

If the view that I have taken be correct, will England find any just cause of war in this notice, or in our taking possession of the whole country? I think not. England had a much stronger interest in maintaining the independence of Texas than she has for that of Oregon, and fully as much right; and yet she neither made war upon us for this wholesale annexation of Texas, and I have no doubt that she prevented Mexico from declaring war; for she knows full well that with the United States that "*le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*." War with the Chinese, where the loser pays all expenses, is a different thing from a war with the United States, when all that she could gain, would not pay for the ammunition that it cost; and my life upon it, Mr. Chairman, England is not going to have a war with the United States, for the sake of the Hudson Bay Company, or for a fur trade that is said to be diminishing in value very rapidly.

But if the President should be mistaken, and the venerable statesman over the way, and the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and all of us who are in favor of this notice, it ought not to affect the action of this House upon

these resolutions. There was a time when it became our duty to pause and reflect upon the consequences of any particular measure, (where principle was not involved,) and the sternest statesman might well ask what would England or France say upon this subject? Happily, that time has long since passed, and our affairs are administered without the least reference to the opinions of any nation on the globe—peaceably, but firmly pursuing such a course, as in our best judgment is calculated to secure liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and whatever others may think, I have yet to learn one single act connected with our foreign policy that I would wish undone; and as a proof of the integrity of our course, while we exacted and received compensation for injustices from the hands of nearly every foreign government, I believe the first claim has yet to be made against this government for any injustice done to the weakest or the strongest power. Acts of individual wrong there may have been; but I cannot recollect one single act of our government, for which we have been called upon to make reparation.

As an American, as a citizen of the world, it is a source of the most sincere satisfaction, and more than all things else makes me admire the wisdom of our forefathers, who transmitted this rich heritage, and, when rightly and universally understood, will do more in favor of republican institutions than all the disquisitions of essayists than have ever been written on the science of government. This fact is worth more than all the theory upon the subject for two thousand years.

What reasons have been given to induce the belief that the passage of these resolutions will precipitate a war? It resolves itself simply into an expression of opinion. It was one of the happiest of Sir Boyle Roach's bulls, when he said "*the best way to avoid danger, was to meet it plump in the face*." Every man on this floor has, or will find it so, in private life, and it is equally true in relation to nations. Having no aristocracy to support, or favorite families to keep in the ascendant, the world has become satisfied that individually and collectively the American people, upon the slightest encroachment on their rights, would almost as soon fight as not. That idea has kept them from many a collision. I recollect when Gen. Jackson informed the French government, that if they did not pay the money they owed us, he would cause himself to be paid in a summary manner; war was considered inevitable; we were no more prepared then than now; but the French government saw that the people were ready to support the President—the money was promptly paid—and the harmony of the two nations remained undisturbed.

For these reasons, and others which have been adduced by the friends of this measure, which I will not trespass on the attention of the committee to recapitulate, I shall vote for the passage of these resolutions, not because I am in favor of a war, but because I believe that we are strictly within the stipulations of the treaty; because I hold it to be the most certain means of getting Oregon; because I believe this administration is pledged to use as effectual means to obtain Oregon, as they did to obtain Texas; and because I do not indulge for a moment the idea that their passage can involve this country in a war; because I cannot see the necessity of a different course where England is concerned from that pursued in relation to Mexico.

Before I could consent to sanction by my vote

any policy which might be interpreted into a faltering hesitancy, I must be entirely satisfied that there is not substantial danger of losing Oregon, and involving my country in a war; I must have "confirmation strong as proofs of Holy Writ." "Make me to see it, or so prove it, that the probation bears no hinge-loop to hang a doubt upon," or I will none of it.

There is one thing that cannot fail to gratify every true American heart, which this discussion has elicited, and which even more than the Texan question shows this to be purely a national one. The advocates of this measure are not confined to the supporters of the administration; nor are they influenced by sectional feelings in the views which they take of this great continental question. Whigs and democrats from the North, the South, the East, and the West have buried their pitiful party ani-

mosities and local jealousies, and only vie with each other as to the most efficient manner in which they will support an American President in his manly and patriotic attempt to settle this American question; and if, in the manner of acquiring Oregon, we differ, it only proves the freedom and independence that characterize an American statesman and a republican Congress. Let us not degrade the dignity of the subject, by harboring for an instant the idea that President-making, or political capital, influences the action or the vote of a solitary member on the floor; and whatever plan shall be finally determined upon, and should a collision with any foreign country unfortunately ensue, let this sentiment meet unanimous response from every member of the Congress, and the people from the St. Lawrence to the Rio Grande will re-echo it back: "Our country, our whole country—right or wrong."

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